A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF PASCHIM MEDINIPUR AND PURBA MEDINIPUR, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: English occupies a critical place in the curriculum of India, particularly as a bridge to modernity, global communication and national development. Its role in a country's progress cannot be overstated, especially as it increasingly becomes the lingua franca of global commerce, education and technology. However, despite its significance, disparities in English Language Teaching (ELT) practices are evident across educational institutions, especially between government and private sectors.

Aims and Objectives: This study investigates the current status and perceptions of English Language Teaching practices among teachers and students in secondary schools of Paschim Medinipur and Purba Medinipur districts of West Bengal, where linguistic diversity, socio-economic background and infrastructural disparities shape the learning experience.

Rationale: In India, particularly in West Bengal, secondary education is categorized into government/government-aided schools and private schools. Private institutions often function as English-medium schools and receive no government funding. In contrast, government schools generally adopt English as a second language, resulting in a noticeable disparity in language proficiency and pedagogical effectiveness. The consequences are severe: students from state-run schools often struggle to compete with their peers from private institutions in higher education and employment opportunities. This is primarily due to ineffective teaching strategies, lack of trained teachers, insufficient infrastructure and the overall low priority accorded to English instruction in state-run schools.

Method: The present study was undertaken with the primary objectives of identifying the status of ELT practices, understanding teacher perceptions and exploring demographic differences (gender, location and experience) among teachers and students. The investigation covered 535 teachers and 609 students across rural and urban secondary schools in both districts. The researcher has collected data by using survey questionnaires.

Results and Findings:

Statistical analyses using descriptive and inferential methods yielded nuanced insights into how English is taught. In Paschim Medinipur, the mean score of teachers' perception on ELT methodology stood at 64.30, suggesting a moderately favorable perception of teaching practices. The range of scores (37–96) and standard deviation (12.92) indicate variability in practice. Similarly, in Purba Medinipur, the mean was slightly higher at 66.03, with a greater range (36–98) and standard deviation (15.88), again reflecting a generally favorable but diverse perception.

A gender-based comparison in both districts revealed no significant difference in perception between male and female teachers, highlighting a consistent approach across genders. The mean scores for male and female teachers in Paschim Medinipur were 64.82 and 63.67, respectively and in Purba Medinipur, 66.85 and 64.96, respectively. The t-values in both cases were below the critical value (1.99 at 0.05 level), confirming the absence of gender bias in ELT perception.

However, significant differences emerged between rural and urban teachers in Paschim Medinipur. Urban teachers had a mean perception score of 67.65, significantly higher than rural teachers' 60.66. The t-value of 4.56 confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, suggesting that urban settings may offer better pedagogical support, infrastructure and exposure to English. In contrast, the same rural-urban comparison in Purba Medinipur did not yield significant differences, indicating relatively balanced teaching experiences across the district.

Teacher experience also played a role in shaping perceptions. In Paschim Medinipur, no significant difference was found between teachers with below and above 10 years of experience. However, in Purba Medinipur, teachers with more than 10 years of experience had significantly higher mean scores (68.07) compared to less experienced teachers (63.24), with a t-value of 2.49. This implies that experience enhances pedagogical understanding and adaptation in English teaching in Purba Medinipur.

Student perception forms a critical part of this study, revealing the end-user perspective on English teaching practices. In Paschim Medinipur, students' mean perception score was 73.38 (range: 34–112), suggesting a generally favorable attitude.

Skewness (-0.05) and kurtosis (1.91) further reinforced the normality of the data distribution. A similar trend was seen in Purba Medinipur, albeit with a slightly lower mean of 67.65.

Gender-wise, both districts showed no significant differences between male and female students' perceptions. In Paschim Medinipur, male and female students' mean scores were 73.48 and 73.24 respectively, while in Purba Medinipur, the scores were 67.03 and 68.15. These findings underscore that gender does not substantially influence students' attitudes toward English teaching in secondary schools.

When comparing rural and urban students, no significant differences were found in either district, indicating equitable exposure and teaching methods regardless of geographical location. In Paschim Medinipur, rural students had a mean score of 72.05, while urban students scored 74.77. In Purba Medinipur, rural students scored 67.02 and urban students 68.20. The t-values remained below the threshold for significance in both cases.

The comparison between government and private school students revealed no statistically significant differences in perception in either district. This challenges the common assumption that private school students invariably have better language education. In Paschim Medinipur, government school students scored 72.68 against private school students' 71.24 and in Purba Medinipur, 68.12 versus 66.35. These results indicate that while infrastructural and pedagogical resources may differ, the subjective experience of English education does not vary significantly based on school type, at least in perception.

Challenges and Contextual Issues: Despite the generally favorable perceptions, several systemic issues hinder effective English language acquisition. The data suggest that a major concern is students' anxiety and bias toward English, often exacerbated by their non-English-speaking family backgrounds. This language barrier affects their understanding of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. The disconnect between students' linguistic environment and the academic expectations of English leads to persistent underperformance and lack of confidence.

Additionally, teachers highlighted the inadequacy of existing teaching methodologies. The continued reliance on outdated methods like the grammar-translation approach, coupled with a lack of interactive, communicative teaching strategies, limits students' engagement and practical proficiency. The absence of transactional, student-centered methods prevents the development of listening and speaking skills essential for real-world use.

Another significant barrier is the scarcity of trained English teachers, especially in rural government schools. Teachers are often burdened with multiple responsibilities and lack access to ongoing professional development. Moreover, schools suffer from poor infrastructure, lack of language labs, teaching aids and multimedia support, which hinders experiential and immersive learning experiences.

Implications: The findings underscore the urgent need to reform English language teaching at the secondary level. To bridge the learning gap between private and public institutions, particularly in underprivileged rural settings, a multifaceted strategy is necessary.

1. **Curriculum Modernization**: There is a pressing need to revise the curriculum to integrate communicative and functional English, moving beyond rote memorization and grammar-based approaches.

2. **Teacher Training**: Structured training programs and refresher courses focusing on modern ELT methodologies should be made mandatory. Particular emphasis must be placed on transactional and interactive techniques to enhance student participation.

3. **Infrastructure Development**: Both districts require improved school infrastructure, including well-equipped classrooms, language laboratories, libraries with English resources and ICT-based teaching aids to support immersive learning.

4. **Pedagogical Innovation**: Incorporating task-based, student-centered learning approaches, supported by multicultural educational frameworks, can help address learner diversity and increase engagement.

5. **Community and Parental Engagement**: Awareness programs for parents can help build a conducive home environment for language learning, particularly for first-generation learners.

6. **Feedback Mechanisms**: Continuous assessment and constructive feedback from teachers play a pivotal role in the learning process. Balanced feedback strategies combining encouragement with corrective input can significantly improve learner motivation and outcomes.

7. **Policy Interventions**: Policymakers must recognize the strategic importance of English proficiency in the global era. Investments in teacher recruitment, training and monitoring mechanisms are crucial to building a robust English education framework.

Conclusion:

This study provides comprehensive insights into the status and perception of English language teaching in two major districts of West Bengal. Despite favorable perceptions among both teachers and students, significant systemic challenges persist. Differences in teaching methodologies between rural and urban schools, variation in teacher experience and infrastructural limitations all point to the need for targeted interventions. The findings highlight that improving English language education requires a collaborative approach involving curriculum reform, teacher empowerment, infrastructural investment and pedagogical innovation. Given the growing importance of English in the globalized world, addressing these challenges is not just an educational imperative but a socio-economic necessity for achieving the vision of a developed and inclusive India.

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